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Putin Is Forging a New Ukraine—Just Not the One He Wants

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The great enemy of would-be statesmen is the law of unintended consequences. President Vladimir Putin of Russia, caricatured by friend and foe alike as a master geopolitician, should be discomfited by this law. The man who is trying desperately to make Ukraine a constituent element in the Eurasian Union, is doing nothing other than hastening the formation of a post-Soviet, Ukrainian political identity—an identity that looks West for inspiration.

Mr. Putin's work in building a new Ukrainian consciousness began no later than the fall of 2004, a period during which his popularity in that country was higher than either of the candidates running for president in Ukraine. Mr. Putin oversaw a Russian policy designed to ensure that Viktor Yanukovich would win the 2004 elections against opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko.

THE IMPACT OF THE ORANGE REVOLUTION

The Kremlin's effort to assist Mr. Yanukovich was multifaceted. It included:

- a major media campaign lauding Mr. Yanukovich and slandering Mr. Yushchenko;

- the provision of substantial funding and "political technologists" (consultants) for the Yanukovich campaign;
- the support of the many clergy in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate;
- several visits by Mr. Putin to Kyiv in the fall of 2004 to demonstrate his support for Mr. Yanukovich;
- two separate congratulations from Mr. Putin to Mr. Yanukovich after the Central Election Commission declared him the winner of the falsified second round of presidential elections.

Simply put, the geopolitical master put his resources and prestige on the line and failed to make Mr. Yanukovich the president of Ukraine. Following the massive protests known as "the Orange Revolution," Viktor Yushchenko won the honest third round of presidential elections. President Putin's opposition to Mr. Yushchenko did not cease after the Orange Revolution. It culminated in early January of 2006, when Gazprom, the giant Russian gas producer, insisted on a multiple increase in the price of the gas that it supplied to Ukraine. When Ukraine balked, Gazprom turned off the gas, precipitating a crisis in Ukraine and Europe—a stunt that it repeated three years later.

Mr. Putin's aggressive support of Viktor Yanukovich in 2004 and later years began to turn public opinion in Kyiv and elsewhere in the center of Ukraine away from Russia. Many analysts have commented on the differences in outlook between the Ukraine's East and West, an historic divide that has weakened considerably over Ukraine's twenty-plus years of independence. But Kyiv and the center of the country were always seen by East and West as "theirs," and voters in the center would function the way that independent voters do in the United States, at times supporting candidates associated with the East and at other times supporting those representing the views of the West. But the Kremlin's heavy hand in 2004 and later meant that Russian support for a particular Ukrainian candidate was less likely to help those candidates gain support in the center.

Mr. Putin's prestige was not the only Russian asset that took a hit in Ukraine during and after the Orange Revolution. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) has been an important promoter of Russian interests in Ukraine. The UOC-MP is one of the two principal churches in the country. The other is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP). According to Marat Gellman, one of the "political technologists" who worked in Ukraine for Mr. Yanukovich in 2004, the prestige of the UOC-MP dropped substantially because of its outspoken support for Mr. Yanukovich and condemnation of the Orange Revolution.

THE EUROMAIDAN

Mr. Putin was given a second chance to demonstrate his understanding of the Ukrainian political scene last fall, when Mr. Yanukovich was negotiating a trade association agreement with the EU. In order to discourage the Ukrainian president from concluding the deal, the Kremlin sharply restricted imports from Ukraine. President Yanukovich announced in late November that, given the likelihood of a Russian trade embargo, he would not pursue the trade association agreement with the EU. (In the view of this author, Yanukovich made his decision because he realized that the EU would only agree to the deal if Yulya Tymoshenko was released from jail, a condition he would not accept; but Yanukovich hid behind the Russian threat in making his public announcement.)

Mr. Putin's fall economic embargo did not endear him to Ukraine's political center or its oligarchs, including many from the East; and, of course, Mr. Yanukovich's repudiation of negotiations with the EU led to immediate protests of tens of thousands in Kyiv's Independence Square (the Maidan). When Mr. Yanukovich cracked down on the demonstrators, hundreds of thousands turned out, now protesting his increasingly authoritarian rule. The beleaguered Ukrainian president again turned to the Kremlin for support, visiting Moscow in mid December and returning with a "gift" of lower gas prices and USD 15 billion in promised loans. Not surprisingly, this latest Kremlin tactic would not solve Mr. Yanukovich's political problem, because gifts from the East would not persuade Ukrainians fed up with police tactics and massive corruption to stop protesting.

The Kremlin playbook, however, had more to offer than deep pockets. The Russian media, still omnipresent in

Ukraine, was painting a lurid picture of the demonstrators as fascists and anti-Semites, who were seeking to overthrow the democratically elected President Yanukovich. While it is true that the nationalist Svoboda Party and the recently formed Praviy Sektor (Right Sector) played an important role in the demonstrations, there has been little evidence that they were driving Ukraine toward extreme nationalist policies. (The one example—the dropping of Russian as an official language by the post-Yanukovich government, a new policy only introduced by Mr. Yanukovich in 2010—was reversed within a few days.) The people of Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities with demonstrations understood that the Russian media was peddling disinformation. Evidence of this was a letter signed by the Chief Rabbi of Ukraine denying that anti-Semitism was rampant among the protesters and opposition parties.

DAYS OF THE SNIPERS

More importantly, the Kremlin was advocating that Mr. Yanukovich use force, if necessary, to clear protesters from the streets of his capital. Sergei Glaziyev, a Kremlin spokesman on Ukraine, explicitly urged this. And after Mr. Yanukovich visited Mr. Putin in Sochi, the Ukrainian leader followed Mr. Glaziyev's advice. In doing so, Mr. Yanukovich had a problem. The normal method for crowd-control operations is to use large numbers of police armed with shields and clubs. But in Ukraine, the police as a whole were and are not willing to use violence against their own peacefully demonstrating citizens. Only certain police units were "reliable." To disperse the demonstrators, some high-level tactician came up with the idea of using live ammunition and sniper fire against the demonstrators—to promote panic.

The result was scores of dead, mainly, but not exclusively protesters. The violence finally persuaded the EU to enact financial sanctions against the Ukrainian officials, which prompted the mass defection from Yanukovich's Party of the Regions and downfall of his government. The Kremlin's support for the force option did not enhance its appeal anywhere in the country, with the possible exception of Crimea. Indeed, Kyiv is still thick with rumors that Russian Spetsnaz (special forces) were among the snipers and Russian provocateurs were active on the Euromaidan.

THE CRIMEAN GAMBIT AND THUNDER IN THE EAST

The disastrous results for the Kremlin of Mr. Yanukovich's use of snipers did not persuade Mr. Putin to pause. Instead, he doubled down on force, sending troops—sometimes acknowledged as Russian, sometimes not—out from the Russian Black Sea base in Sevastopol to establish full control over the Crimean Peninsula, in flagrant violation of Russian commitments under the Budapest Memorandum and international law. Russian Federation officials and media intoned that ethnic Russians and Russian speaking Ukrainians in the East and South of Ukraine were under threat from the "fascists" and "extreme nationalists" in the "illegitimate government" in Kyiv. Mr. Putin and other officials claimed the right to protect these people.

The Kremlin also encouraged demonstrations in Crimea and the East of Ukraine against the government in Kyiv. While such demonstrations occurred without serious resistance in Crimea, where Russian troops roam the streets, in other cities, including Donetsk and Kharkiv, pro-Russian demonstrators were usually outnumbered by supporters of the Kyiv government. Even the bussing in of "pro-Russian" demonstrators from Russia had not turned the tide in favor of Mr. Putin on the streets of eastern Ukraine.

Moscow's position in the East was also weakened by the success of the new government in Kyiv in reaching out to major oligarchs from that region. Perhaps the brilliant tactical hand of the recently released Yulya Tymoshenko was behind the decision to offer the governorship of Donetsk oblast' to Donbass oligarch Serhiy Taruta, and the governorship of Dnipropetrovsk to Ihor Kolomoisky. Of greater note is the fact that the latter position was first offered to Viktor Pinchuk, a long time foe of Tymoshenko. That offer showed that, for Tymoshenko and the government in Kyiv, the national danger posed by Moscow trumps other considerations. The public statements of Rinat Akhmetov, the richest man in the country and long time bankroller of Mr. Yanukovich, is another indicator of oligarch solidarity in favor of a unified Ukraine within its current borders.

It is not just the oligarchs in the East who are concerned by Russian tactics. East-West divisions in Ukraine are easing

because the young in the East do not have the natural inclination of their Soviet-bred elders to look toward Moscow, and they, like people in the center and the West, were not strong supporters of Mr. Yanukovych. And as young people from throughout the entire country are being drafted to defend Ukraine from possible Russian aggression in the East, the anger at Moscow is growing.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF MR. PUTIN'S "SUCCESS"

Moscow's diminishing influence is also evident in the position and circumstances of the UOC-MP. Metropolitan Volodymyr, the head of the church in Ukraine, understood that the church's position during the Orange Revolution hurt its standing. That's why he and most of his bishops stood on the sidelines during the Euromaidan crisis, much to the aggravation of Patriarch Kirill in Moscow. The UOC-MP has also been silent as Kremlin forces seized control in Crimea; but it has been embarrassed by the statement of Patriarch Kirill's spokesman defending "the Russian peacemaking mission in Ukraine." During this national crisis, the UOC-MP has been neutral. At the same time, clerics of the UOC-KP, the Autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church were on the Maidan standing between the protesters and the police in the effort to prevent bloodshed. This can only weaken the standing of the UOC-MP in the long run.

If Mr. Putin "succeeds" in splitting Crimea from the rest of Ukraine, he will alter the political balance in the country. The most reliable voters for pro-Russian policies are in Crimea. It has not required massive fraud for Mr. Yanukovych to gather 90 percent of the vote on the peninsula, which has 2.3 million inhabitants (out of a population of 46 million). Removing those voters from the national rolls gives a leg up to politicians orienting policy toward Europe.

A FOUNDATION MYTH OR TWO FOR THE EMERGING UKRAINE

When nations set off on a new trajectory, there are usually events that are seen as pivotal and cherished moments that become the object of veneration. For Bolshevik Russia, there was the legend of October, when Lenin's sudden appearance in St. Petersburg set off the Revolution and the crew of Russian Navy cruiser *Aurora* defected to the Bolsheviks and fired the first shots. If the upcoming presidential elections in Ukraine produces a stable, competent government (no certainty), then the courage of the Maidan demonstrators will become a founding myth of the new Ukraine. And Mr. Putin will join Mr. Yanukovych as one of the villains in the founding myth.

Yet Mr. Putin's villainy may well exceed that of Mr. Yanukovych in Ukraine's emerging national consciousness. Nations on new courses often find their paths blocked by foreign enemies. The French Revolutionaries faced the armies of a coalition of monarchs. Their response was the levee en masse—the conscription of vast numbers of Frenchmen. Fired by zeal against foreign invasion, the armies of the French Revolution routed its opponents and cemented a new patriotism in France. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran in 1980 served a similar purpose for the clerics who had just come to power. The Russian invasion of Crimea has attracted the ire of Ukrainians across the country. The young men being conscripted know whom to blame for their new military service. If Mr. Putin orders the Red Army into Ukraine's East and Ukrainian blood is shed, his fate as the new Ukraine's archnemesis will become the matter of lore.

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